

New York Row Houses: Greek Revival Facades

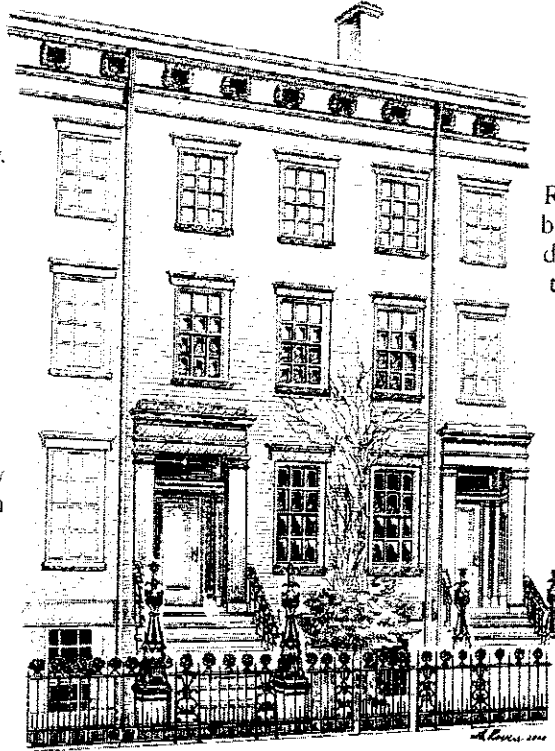
The Greek Revival style emerged in the early 1830's in New York. The earliest examples of the style can be seen on East 4th Street, west of Broadway. Of the lovely row which had existed there, the only remaining house is the Seabury Treadwell House, now known as The Merchant House. While the Federal style offered pleasing proportions and handsome, modest ornament, the Greek Revival style, in its association with Ancient Greece, sought to evoke a greater dignity and drama.

Federal house bricks were usually laid in the Flemish bond style, which alternates the long side and the end of the brick, while the Greek Revival Running bond style utilized lamp-black in the mortar to minimize the joints between the brick. This technique was used to create the impression of one large, smooth expanse of the row house facade.

To further enhance the impression of grandeur, rectangular window lintels and sills were typically simple and spare in ornament, often almost flush with the facade.

The sole characteristic of the Greek Revival facade, which broke the planar unity of the house, was the monumental door enframement and rich ornament on the stoop iron work. The "Grecian Doorway", characteristic of the early Greek Revival period, consisted of fluted Doric columns on each side of the door together with pilasters supporting a flat entablature. Recessed doorways emerged, further enhancing the monumentality of the facade and providing shelter. Where the Federal door was multi-paneled, the Greek Revival door offered a plain rectangular transom above a single-paneled door. Sidelights were most common, with simple glass panes separated by wood mutin bars.

Most frequently seen Greek motifs were fret (Greek Key), Acanthus Leaf and Anthemion, used to decorate door



frames, columns and wrought iron fences. The most beautiful of the wrought iron work can be seen on the parlor window balconies, a feature introduced during the Greek Revival period. Though few of these balconies remain, due in large part to decay and wartime scrap metal drives, two windowed balconies at 110 2nd Avenue are prime examples.

Unlike the roof of a Federal house, which was A-frame, the Greek Revival roof was slightly pitched, allowing for an attic with small windows often decorated with cast iron laurel wreaths. Cornice treatments consisted of a flat, horizontal board called "fascia" across the full width of the house. Above the fascia, decorative moldings such as the dentil, egg and dart or leaf and tongue moldings were used.

Cost-cutting deviations emerged as the style gained popularity. White marble columns were replaced by brownstone by the 1840's, as dark colors became fashionable. Traditional pediments replaced Doric columns as the style became mainstream. Unfortunately, the "cheapening" of the style was in large part the cause of its decline. By the late 1840's, when the Romantic Movement took hold, the architectural restraint of Greek Revival gave way to the desire for asymmetry and rich ornamentation. Examples of this transition emerged in details such as elaborate wrought iron work in the verandas at number 3 and 4 Gramercy Park West as well as the newel posts in the Cushman Row house depicted above.

The facades of 13 red brick houses on Washington Square Park are the purest examples of early Greek Revival style. Other wonderful examples are at 20-26 Willow Street in Brooklyn Heights, Colonnade Row on Lafayette Place, of which only four remain, as well as Cushman Row, West 20th Street between 9th and 10th Avenues.

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